

---

# READERS

WRITE

---

## On "Aesthetic Engineering"

*To the editors:*

Thank you for printing the essay "Aesthetic Engineering" by Casey Blake. I am a painter trying to nourish a poetic and historical imagination. I am acutely aware of the "collective amnesia" fostered by our rationalized, capitalist culture, with its relentless internal dynamism, its exaltation of linear, evolutionary "growth," and its obsession with ever shifting fashions in taste and intellect. The role of the artist in this setting is difficult indeed, and it is not made any easier by critics like Clement Greenberg. Blake outlines Greenberg's presumptuous "effort to codify artistic Modernism," his prescriptions for the further "evolution" of painting along Modernist lines, and his redefinition of the "relationships between critic and artist, and between critic and connoisseur, along lines parallel to the industrial division of labor between administrator and worker." Blake is eloquent and to the point when he says, "Somewhere in all this, in the cult of novelty, in the assumption that painting is a search for an as yet unachieved flatness, in the application of scientific method to artistic creativity, and in the evolutionistic idea of aesthetic progress, the artist and his work have been lost."

The problem for me begins just here in Blake's essay. After showing that Greenberg's theories reverse the traditional relationship between artist and critic, Blake asserts that this reversal actually occurred. Blake is on to something here. But the evidence for this claim is thin, consisting only of Gene Davis's testimony in 1962 that Greenberg was "the first art critic in history to have exerted a *major* influence on painters." Blake reads Davis's affectionate letter to his mentor as a "sign" that Greenberg's version of Modernism culminates in "the demotion of art to the carrying-out principles elaborated in the aesthetic planning office." Then Tom Wolfe gets to tweet that this is "The new order of things in the art world. . . ." This sweeping proclamation about the state of the visual arts is half true but oversimplified.

As I see it, the history of American art since World War II is a bit more complicated than Blake (or Wolfe) suggests. I have no doubt that Greenberg's theories have had a pernicious effect on people "enmeshed in the institutional art world of galleries, dealers, museums, universities, and journals." His writings, with their emphasis on structure and form, trivialize the role of the artist in our

culture and deny that art can have meaning outside itself. But, and this is a large but, the *early* artists for whom Greenberg presumed to speak—the artists of the New York school of the 1940s and 1950s—were quite intent on speaking for themselves. And that is just what they did. In numerous manifestos, articles, letters to editors, in countless conversations among themselves, and, at times, most eloquently in their work, artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, William Baziotis, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning, and others of the early Abstract Expressionists asserted that more than formal considerations were at the heart of their work.

These artists were making urgent and deliberate efforts to infuse their work with *meaning*, to confront head-on the “crisis of subject matter” (as they termed it) that had been precipitated at least in part by the pure formalist ethic of much European Modernism—the very ethic exalted by Greenberg. In the interest of impregnating their work with content, these artists took a new look at European Surrealism, with its emphasis on the dark, irrational side of man’s nature, its fascination with mythopoeic and dream imagery, its technique of automatist painting that supposedly tapped the unconscious for fresh images that would resonate with universal symbolic force.

To suggest, as Blake does, that these artists were primarily following the lead of one particular art critic is vastly to underestimate the cultural and historical forces at work on their sensibilities and to ignore the very conscious efforts these artists were making to transcend mere formalism. And to let an intellectual fashionmonger like Tom Wolfe, who as far as I can tell is resolutely ahistorical and simpleminded, have the last word (“first you get the Word, and then you can see”) is to substitute cliché for complexity.

There is, for me, a sad irony in the efforts of the Abstract Expressionists to revitalize art and to connect it with its earlier roots in ritual and magic. These artists in the 1940s nurtured an abiding contempt for the wealthy and fashionable art world of the Fifty-seventh Street galleries and the Museum of Modern Art, which at that time was mesmerized by the modern European masters of the cube. Nonetheless, in the end most of them learned to accommodate themselves to this world. In time, their paintings became so large and so expensive that only museums and corporate businesses could afford the vast space the canvases required and the big, hard cash the artists and their dealers demanded. A movement that had begun in protest ended once again in accommodation. Irving Sandler charts this course with elegance and authority in *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970).

Greenberg’s prescriptions for art are repugnant. I have no doubt, I will say again, that he has influenced many participants in the art scene. These include not only the grand arbiters of taste like gallery owners and museum directors but also hundreds of graduate students seeking advanced degrees in the fine arts. Art

has recently become extraordinarily professionalized. This elaborate process of professionalization, rather than the influence of a single critic, is the real force behind aesthetic engineering.

But as an artist I am bound to assert that there are some of us, at least, who are listening to voices other than the established critics'. Many times they are deep internal whispers and sometimes cries from the past.

**Karen Parker Lears**

Columbia, Missouri

**Casey Blake replies:**

Karen Parker Lears's thoughtful comments on my essay provide a welcome opportunity to clarify any misconceptions about my interpretation of Clement Greenberg's art criticism and its relation to the early New York School painters. As the following remarks indicate, the differences between Lears's position and my own are not as great as her letter implies.

Nowhere in my essay did I suggest that the first generation of New York School artists were deeply influenced by Greenbergian aesthetics. In fact, I completely agree with Lears on the importance of Surrealism, psychoanalysis, dream imagery, and subjective experience to these painters—especially to Pollock, Rothko, and Newman. However, I did argue that Greenberg's theory fundamentally shaped the work of the second generation of New York School painters that came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s. I suspect that anyone who has spent some time looking at paintings by Mark Rothko and Jules Olitski has noticed the tremendous differences in form, symbolism, and sensibility that separate these two artists. Greenberg's influence does not explain all these differences, but it certainly accounts for some of them. Gene Davis's enthusiastic letters to Greenberg are simply literary evidence of a trend that is visibly manifest in the canvases of Olitski, Stella, Noland, and other "color field" and "hard-edged" abstractionists: namely, Greenberg's increasingly important role in domesticating the critical and even emancipatory aspects of the first New York School's art.

My purpose in examining Greenberg's aesthetics was to discover what had happened to the promise of the early Abstract Expressionists and of the American Modernist movement in general. Like the American artists and writers surrounding Alfred Stieglitz's 291 and the *Seven Arts* in the 1910s, the first New York School painters were profoundly at odds with the anti-democratic and bureaucratic cast of modern American cultural life. However, as Lears correctly points out, "a movement that had begun in protest ended once again in accommodation." Not only did Pollock, Rothko, and the rest succumb to the pressures of Manhattan's institutionalized art world, their work was systematically touted by

the United States Information Agency and the State Department in the 1950s as a weapon in the cultural cold war.

Since then, government-supported exhibitions, *Time* cover stories, Mobil Oil-sponsored retrospectives, and packs of tenured professors have done their best to publicize the "triumph of American painting" at home and abroad. Yet the promise of a new popular culture, of a mass aesthetic consciousness critical of corporate capitalism and its entertainment industry, has not flowered alongside this acceptance of American avant-garde art. Instead, a denatured version of the early New York School's work has been prepared for public consumption by critics like Greenberg, winning a superficial respect for this art from those who frequent museum fundraisers while divesting it of any significance. What all this suggests is that the "triumph of American painting" has really been the triumph of the American critic and his followers.

My essay on Greenberg was also intended to make a small contribution toward directing discussion of Modernist culture on the left out of the dead end of two equally obsolete positions. The first of these, articulated in its most sophisticated form in the essays of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, denigrates abstract art and advocates a thoroughly politicized and industrialized culture embracing agit-prop, poster, and technologically advanced media. Reveling in the mechanical advances of industrial capitalism, which in Brecht's words "operates . . . by taking given needs on a massive scale, exorcizing them, organizing them and mechanizing them so as to revolutionize everything," this line of cultural criticism urges the artist to seize the opportunities provided by new technology. In this view, the artist should proletarianize himself by abandoning genteel pretensions and planting himself squarely in the hustle and bustle of industrial production. Brecht accordingly praised filmmakers for their emphasis on "external action and not introspective psychology." Like the effects of factory labor on the consciousness of the modern worker, film "dissolves everything into processes, abandons the hero as the vehicle for everything and mankind as the measure, and thereby smashes the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel."<sup>1</sup> Mankind and introspection thus obliterated, the filmgoer and the worker presumably are sufficiently liberated from bourgeois mores to make a revolution.

The second tradition of Modernist criticism on the left, developed by Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, finds in Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist art a submerged protest from a psychological and aesthetic realm that remains relatively unscathed by capitalism's drive for an administered existence. Here it is not the explicitly political or proletarianized aspects of modern art, but its complex "inner logic" that, according to Marcuse, "terminates in the emergence of

<sup>1</sup> Bertold Brecht, "The Film, the Novel, and Epic Theatre," in John Willet, ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 50.

another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions."<sup>2</sup>

What both of these traditions omit is the attention to the possibilities for a truly democratic cultural life that emerged in the writings of Ruskin, Morris, Marx, and the *Seven Arts* authors, who concerned themselves with the devastating cultural impact of the capitalist division of labor. Their ideas are still provocative partly because they do not lend themselves to the easy answers offered by the Brecht/Benjamin and Adorno/Marcuse tradition. When viewed from the perspective of a Morris, Brecht's prescription of "external action and not introspective psychology" as an antidote to the obsolete values of capitalism looks like something less than fast fast relief. Indeed, Brecht's manifesto has been gleefully answered by advertisers, Hollywood producers, and other doyens of corporate dreck. Given the current ubiquity of mass culture, the further smashing of introspection hardly seems a "revolutionary" measure.

Adorno and Marcuse's defense of Modernist art as a psychological refuge in an oppressive world (in many ways similar to Lears's remarks) is certainly closer to the truth, but here too recent events have made this position untenable. Greenberg was himself first motivated by a desire to rescue the Modernist movement from the dual assault of politicized Proletcult and mass culture, but his theory ended up in spinning a dense cocoon around American paintings, leaving artists to engage in a formalist "escape from ideas" while insulating the public against the critical implications of their work. It is no longer possible to argue with Adorno, Marcuse, and Greenberg for the *inherent* subversiveness of all Modernist art. That art is shot through with the contradictions of contemporary society and exists neither as its reflection nor as its still-autonomous radical offspring.

The questions raised by Morris and others about the possibility of a democratic reintegration of art and everyday life transcend the false opposition of mechanized and autonomous art—false because neither position challenges the division of labor that separates the creation and enjoyment of art from other activities. A democratic culture must begin with the sobering realization that the promise of modern art has been deformed into its opposite, that the Modernists' hope of liberating unconscious resistance to the established order has become a stale cliché that legitimizes the measured administration of art by Greenbergites, museum directors, and bohemian bureaucrats. In order to glimpse the possibility of a democratic culture, it is essential to understand how often the most critical elements of our recent heritage have been recast in essentially undemocratic forms. Once that is done, I suggest we follow Lears in turning, among other places, to "deep internal whispers and sometimes cries from the past" for a democratic alternative.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 7.